



NEWS RELEASE

32ND INFANTRY BRIGADE COMBAT TEAM

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Farewell, Iraq

By Lt. Col. Tim Donovan
32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team

BAGHDAD — It's been a long deployment for 3,200-plus soldiers of the Wisconsin National Guard's 32nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, but it is finally coming to an end. Sometime in early January, the first of many chartered airliners will touch down at a Wisconsin airfield and Red Arrow soldiers will begin planting their boots back on the ground in their home state after completing their service in Iraq.

As the 32nd Brigade's public affairs officer in Iraq, I've had an opportunity to send a few dozen releases from Baghdad over the past eight months to let Wisconsin know what our troops are doing here. These have all been straightforward, fact-based descriptions of our units' missions and our soldiers' accomplishments. In this final dispatch, I will be a bit more personal, as some of the things I think Wisconsin should know are less tangible. So opinions and impressions I have formed from my observations here are sprinkled in.

The mobilization—which involved the largest operational deployment of Wisconsin Guard troops since World War II—actually started more than a year before it formally began. Throughout 2008, the brigade's soldiers beefed up their once-a-month weekend training and spent a week longer than normal during annual training in August 2008. Last January the brigade's soldiers travelled to Camp Blanding, Fla., for a final three weeks of pre-mobilization training, checking off requirements for weapons qualification, individual warrior tasks, and accomplishing the collective training that would pull them together into effective teams of soldiers, leaders, staffs.

By the time the 32nd arrived for two final months of training at Fort Bliss, Texas, toward the end of February, it may already have been the best trained National Guard brigade ever to report to a mobilization training site. But Red Arrow soldiers continued to train, now focusing on the specific missions that awaited them in Iraq—missions, in many cases, completely different from the types of things the brigade's units would normally do.

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A few years earlier, an infantry brigade in Iraq would likely be engaged in full-spectrum combat operations. But by 2009 U.S. force levels were declining as combat operations shifted to stability operations, so the 32nd Brigade was assigned missions that supported the things that needed to be done in the present rather than the past.

The brigade's missions, though perhaps less glamorous than combat operations, were no less important or difficult. Arguably they were harder and even more essential. The 32nd was assigned not to break Iraq's military forces with combat power, but to work together with government, military and civilian officials to build Iraq up. This is important and difficult work in a combat zone.

When we arrived here in May 2009 we were ready to do our jobs as well as they could be done. And we were committed to leave Iraq a better place than we found it.

In the harsh and challenging environment that greeted them eight months ago, Red Arrow soldiers got right to work.

Spread out across a country about the size of California, they took over the administration of several forward operating bases and the International Zone in central Baghdad, they assumed responsibility for theater internment facilities and treated detainees humanely and with respect, they provided area security and base defense, they secured ground movements, formed quick reaction forces, moved 10,000 detainees without incident, closed the largest detention facility on the planet, trained a corps of professional Iraqi corrections officers, inspected the nation's detention facilities to ensure they met international standards, turned U.S.-controlled International Zone properties to the Iraqi government and kept the IZ safe. And they performed some missions we can't yet talk about.

They did all of these things—they did them as well as they can be done—because they brought with them a rare combination of military training and the civilian education, skills, life experiences, creativity, and maturity that abound in a National Guard comprised of citizen-soldiers. And they also did these things with a Wisconsin work ethic and high standards that reflect our values as an Army and a nation, and as Wisconsin Guard soldiers.

Wisconsin National Guard soldiers here saw dramatic improvements in Iraq's confidence as a sovereign nation and in the growing capability of Iraq to positively influence its own destiny. But we did more than merely stand witness to Iraq's historic progress, Wisconsin troops helped write much of that history by their impressive performance here.

We *are* leaving Iraq a better place than we found it. And Iraq is, surprisingly, returning the favor.

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As we leave Iraq a better nation with a brighter future, we are leaving here as better soldiers, to be sure, because soldiers always grow from the experience of intense soldiering. But most of us are also returning to Wisconsin as better citizens, better leaders, better followers, better employees, better students, better neighbors, better friends.

Most of us will come home, I think, as better people.

The 3,200 Red Arrow soldiers experienced the hardship of a long deployment far from home, endured sandstorms and searing desert heat, were enriched by our exposure to the fascinating Iraqi culture, mastered new and difficult jobs, worked effectively with other services and service members from other nations, formed deep friendships likely to last our lifetimes, and escaped occasional attacks by an ignoble enemy.

You can't help be changed by these experiences. I think they have made us stronger, better.

Our replacements from the Texas Guard's Houston-based 72nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team arrived a few weeks ago and we wish them well. As we transfer our missions to the Texans who will succeed us here, we will move south to Kuwait to wait for our flights home—the end of a journey that began nearly one year ago. We'll see you soon.

And to Iraq, we say "Farewell."

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